Foreword

The dynamic relationship between the producers of knowledge and organizational actors responsible for performance and results addresses a long-standing and thorny theme in Human Resource Development and related applied fields, such as management, education, and human resource management. The frequently lamented gap between research and practice reflects dissatisfaction by both constituencies with failing to achieve the twin goals of relevance and rigor: with a dearth of scholarship that fully meets the concerns of practitioners and impacts organizational practice while conforming to the exacting standards of social science research.

This concern has been a constant in presentations, discussions, publications, and lectures in the field over the years, but the volume of critique and analysis has not yielded commensurate development and adoption of solutions. Over a decade ago, Short, Bing and Kehrhahn (2003) asserted that a priority for HRD be the focus on systematic and systemic solutions to problems faced by stakeholders in organizations. It is high time that this call be heeded. Organizational decision makers are faced with highly complex challenges and opportunities on a daily basis and typically judge academic research not to be useful in providing action guidance, leaving as default positions trial and (often) error, ‘muddling through’, and reliance on the commercial consulting industry. Students preparing for HRD careers in university programs expect professional preparation for advanced practice but often don’t see the transferability of research reports to their future careers. HRD university faculty are typically motivated by the desire to innovate practice but often find themselves constrained by the requirements for career advancement (‘publish or perish’) and the conventions of Tier 1 journals that often don’t accept extended field studies, action research projects, or even in-depth qualitative studies with small numbers of participants.

Some novel approaches have been proposed. The coverage in journal publications, keynotes, and conference sessions of design science and design-based research appears to provide a fruitful avenue (for example, Sadler-Smith, 2013). In the wider arena of the social sciences, Ernest Boyer’s (1990) identification of different, but equally valuable dimensions of scholarship (discovery, integration, application, and teaching/learning) has led to the widespread recognition of the notion of engaged scholarship. Engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007) aims at an integration of problem formulation, theory building, research design, and problem solution, with each step of equal weight and importance. But despite its acceptance and adoption in higher education as a pedagogical tool in the form of community projects, service learning, and participatory research, engaged scholarship continues to run counter to prevailing norms for faculty productivity and career success.

Several explanations for the difficulty of matching research and practice have been offered (see Van de Ven, 2007). Some, for example, argue that scholars and practitioners simply belong on separate professional groups, each following its own institutional rules and conventions. Others describe the issue
as one of knowledge transfer: scholars presenting information in a manner that is not easily accessible to practitioners. Yet another explanation places the blame on the rules for scientific knowledge production. All, however, would agree that improvement is needed, and thus the contributions of the authors in this book are to be applauded for advancing our understanding of one of the central challenges facing our field.

Without current research that is trustworthy and offers innovative action strategies, organizational actors run the risk of recycling fads, implementing yesterday’s solutions, and emulating peers and competitors. Without deep immersion in practice and understanding of its complex contingencies, scholars run the risk of developing ‘ivory tower’ approaches that might work in theory but fail in applied situations and contexts. There is much to explore to further our understanding of the relationships between theory and practice, research and application, and scholars and practitioners. This book takes an important step through advancing our understanding of the intricacies of the issue and, equally important, show-casing and explaining successful theory-practice collaborations and projects.

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REFERENCES


